Sacred Heart University Review

Volume 22
Issue 1 *Sacred Heart University Review, Volume XXII, Number 1, Spring 2002*

Article 3

March 2010

Leonardo and the Creative Act

Charles M. Rosenberg

Leonardo and the Creative Act

Cover Page Footnote
Charles M. Rosenberg is Professor of Art History at the University of Notre Dame. This talk was delivered on July 10, 2003, at Sacred Heart University as the Hesburgh Lecture, sponsored by the Master of Arts in Learning Program of Sacred Heart and the Notre Dame Alumni Club of Fairfield, Connecticut.

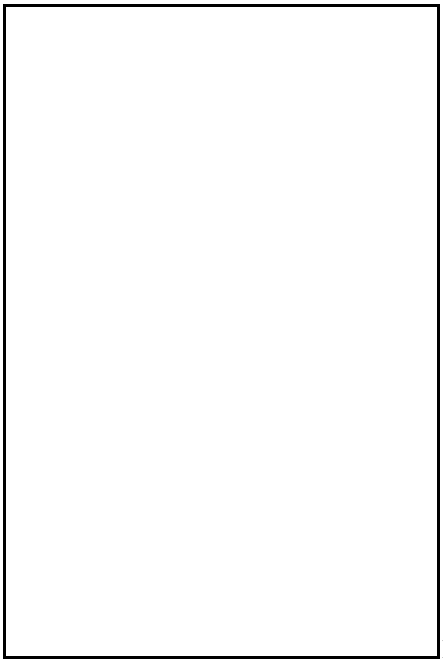

Figure 1: Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*

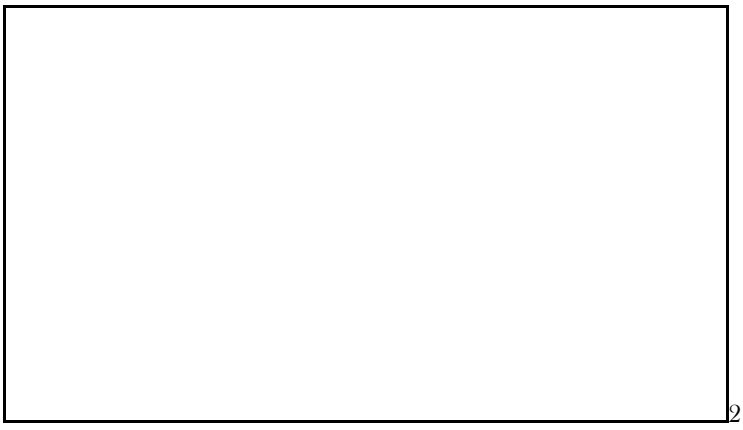

Figure 2: Leonardo da Vinci, *Last Supper*

CHARLES M. ROSENBERG

Leonardo and the Creative Act

In the middle of the sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari, the Aretine architect, painter, and art theorist, published a collection of biographies of the most eminent architects, painters, and sculptors of the Renaissance.[1] He divided his account into three parts or ages. The first age, the fourteenth century, was dominated by Giotto. According to Vasari, it was during this period that art was brought out of the darkness of the medieval, Byzantine style and given a ``Roman tongue." Art began to be based upon the observation of nature and of human emotions, and the transcendental began to be refashioned in more worldly and human terms.

The second period — exemplified by such figures as Ghiberti, Donatello, Brunelleschi, and Masaccio — was the ``adolescence of art." During this age, which roughly corresponds to the first three-quarters of the fifteenth century, artists learned to refine their representational tools. As a result an even greater degree of verism, or ``truth to nature," was achieved. But something was still missing, something that was only attained in the third age, when, according to Vasari, art was actually able to surpass nature.

The particular accomplishment of the masters who worked in this final period was not simply a mastery of representation, but what Vasari termed ``a freedom within the rules," a freedom that demanded ``a rich variety of invention [and] a sure perception of beauty, even in the smallest detail."

Charles M. Rosenberg is Professor of Art History at the University of Notre Dame. *This talk was delivered on July 10, 2003, at Sacred Heart University as*

the Hesburgh Lecture, sponsored by the Master of Arts in Learning Program of Sacred Heart and the Notre Dame Alumni Club of Fairfield, Connecticut.

According to Vasari, the first artist to achieve this new level of perfection was Leonardo da Vinci. At the conclusion of the preface to the Third Book, Vasari contrasted Leonardo to those who came before him:

> The artists [of the second period] forced themselves to try [to] do the impossible through their exertions, especially in their ugly foreshortenings and perspectives which were as disagreeable to look at as they were difficult to do. Although the greater part of their work was well designed and free from error, it still lacked any sense of liveliness as well as the harmonious blending of colors which was first seen in the works of Francia of Bologna and Pietro Perugino (and which made the people run like mad to gaze on this new, realistic beauty, as if they would never see the like again).
>
> But how wrong they were was then demonstrated for all to see in the work of Leonardo da Vinci. It was Leonardo who originated the third style or period, which we like to call the modern age; for in addition to the force and robustness of his draftsmanship and his subtle and exact reproduction of every detail in nature, he showed in his works an understanding of rule, a better knowledge of order, correct proportion, perfect design, and an inspired grace. And artist of great vision and skill and abundant resources, Leonardo may be said to have painted figures that moved and breathed.[2]

According to Vasari, the source of Leonardo's talent was divine, and his fame destined to be eternal:

> In the normal course of events many men and women are born with various remarkable qualities and talents; but occasionally, in a way that transcends nature, a single person is marvelously endowed by heaven with beauty, grace, and talent in such abundance that he leaves other men far behind, all his actions seem inspired, and indeed everything he does clearly comes from God rather than from human art.

> Everyone acknowledged that this was true of Leonardo da Vinci, an artist of outstanding physical beauty who displayed infinite grace in everything he did and who cultivated his genius so brilliantly that all problems he studied he solved with ease. . . . He was a man of regal spirit and tremendous breadth of mind; and his name became so famous that not only was he esteemed during his lifetime but his reputation endured and became even greater after his death.[3]

Vasari's observations regarding the endurance of Leonardo's reputation certainly seem equally true today. The artist has become a paradigm of invention and universality, and his paintings, especially the *Last Supper* and the still enigmatic *Mona Lisa,* have attained the status of cultural icons. These two works in particular are so ingrained in the popular imagination that film makers, advertisers, and satirists quote them with absolute confidence. Yet, ironically, because these two works are so familiar, it is almost impossible to see them, not only physically, because of the crowds, but, more important, conceptually. What I propose to do is to look closely at these two paintings — one a secular portrait, the other a profound religious narrative — in an effort to rediscover what it is about them that has captivated viewers from the moment of their creation. Along the way I will also try to elucidate some of the conceptual strategies that Leonardo employed in creating these masterpieces.

The *Mona Lisa* (fig.1) is a relatively late work. It was probably begun by Leonardo sometime between 1503 and 1506, and completed about a decade later, quite possibly during Leonardo's final few years at the court of Francis I in Amboise. (Leonardo was born in 1452 and died in 1519.)[4] Although the identity of the sitter has been disputed — some historians have suggested that it really represents an ideal court lady painted for Giuliano de' Medici, while computer artist Lillian Schwartz has tried to identify the painting as a feminized self-portrait — the general consensus is that the painting represents Lisa di Antonio Maria Gherardini, the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, a successful Florentine silk and cloth merchant. Frank Zöllner has suggested that the painting was commissioned in conjunction with Francesco's establishment of an independent household on the Via dela Stufa in 1503, and then left unfinished when Leonardo obtained a much more

prestigious commission, the painting of the Battle of Anghiari in the Sala Grande of the Palazzo Vecchio.[5] The *Mona Lisa* seems to have traveled with Leonardo throughout the remainder of his life, for it was in Milan in 1525 in the possession of his artistic heir and protege Francesco Melzi. Leonardo had left all of his notes and works of art to Melzi. Somehow the painting was acquired by the Francis I, for in 1542 it is documented as hanging in the Salle du Bain at Fountainebleau. It has remained in France ever since, hanging in its own alcove in the Louvre, where many of you may well have seen it.

From the time of Vasari to the present two qualities have been acknowledged as giving the *Mona Lisa* its special status: Leonardo's ability to render forms in an extraordinarily convincing fashion and his investment of the sitter with a haunting psychological presence. Although Vasari probably only knew the painting by reputation, his description of it acknowledges both of these elements:

> If one wanted to see how faithfully art can imitate nature, one could perceive it from this head; for here Leonardo subtly reproduced every living detail. The eyes had their natural lustre and moistness, and around them were the lashes and all those rosy and pearly tints that demand the greatest delicacy of execution. . . . The mouth, joined to the flesh-tints of the face by the red of the lips, appeared to be living flesh rather than paint. On looking closely at the pit of her throat one could swear that the pulses were beating. Altogether this picture was painted in a manner to make the most confident artist — no matter who — despair and lose heart. Leonardo also made use of this device: while he was painting Mona Lisa, who was a very beautiful woman, he employed singers and musicians or jesters to keep her full of merriment and so chased away the melancholy that painters usually give to portraits. As a result, in this painting of Leonardo's there was a smile so pleasing that it seemed divine rather than human; and those who saw it were amazed to find that it was as alive as the original.[6]

Leonardo's ability to imitate the visible world was the result of a combination of individual talent and judgment derived from an indefatigable investigation of nature, the human body, and the effects

of light. This was coupled with an unparalleled mastery of the oil medium, a painting technique that was still rather fresh in fifteenth-century Italy.

The inspiration for Mona Lisa's pose on a balcony before a landscape comes from contemporary Flemish portraits.[7] These were also rendered in oil, but lack the sense of atmosphere, the soft light of twilight, which Leonardo employs. The artist's rendering of the smokey play of chiaroscuro on the cheeks and hollows of Mona Lisa's face, the layers of black voile draped gracefully over her shoulders, the wash of golden light on her sleeves, the finely knotted threads along the neckline of her garment, and the dark transparent veil that covers her loosened hair are all extraordinary details. This ability to render form extends to the landscape, where he gives a palpable presence to the heavy moisture laden air that softens the edges of the rocky Paleocene background, testimony to the principles of atmospheric perspective.

Perhaps even more engaging is the other quality that has elevated this painting from portrait to cultural icon: its expressiveness. I think few of us would agree with Vasari's description of Mona Lisa as exuding a sense of merriment, but the smile on her face does constitute a real change in the paradigm of how men and women were normally represented in fifteenth-century portraits. In the first half of the century, women were typically represented in profile, as objects emblematic of male honor.[8] In the third quarter of the century, they began to turn towards the viewer, but they retained their objecthood through their lack of psychological engagement: they stare off into the distance with blank eyes, their faces beautiful, impenetrable masks. One can see this tendency in another of Leonardo's paintings, the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, which is today in the National Gallery in Washington.[9] The portrait of Ginevra, the wife of a very wealthy and well-connected Florentine business man, Luigi Niccolini, was probably commissioned about 1478 by the famous Venetian humanist, Bernardo Bembo, who chose this young and very handsome woman as an object of platonic love. The epigram on the back of the painting, ``Beauty Adorns Virtue," was probably penned by Bembo. We can tell from the back of the panel that it was, unfortunately, trimmed at some point in its history. Like Mona Lisa, the figure was originally shown as half-length. We have a quite beautiful drawing by Leonardo that illustrates how her hands were originally disposed. Although the

sense of atmosphere in the Washington portrait is not nearly as unified as we find in the Mona Lisa and there is a waxier quality to Ginevra's complexion, the play of light on her rose-tinted cheeks and soft halo of golden curls is still masterful. What is more telling from our perspective, however, is the wooden detachment of Ginevra's expression. Perhaps this was meant to reflect her place as an unattainable, platonic ideal, but its effect is to erase any real sense of personality from the figure.[10] We're invited to look at Ginevra as we would a beautiful jewel, to consider her as a symbol, like the juniper bush that frames her head, rather than as a real person.

Our reaction to *Mona Lisa* is quite the opposite. She is actually also inaccessible, for her body is turned away from us so that her left shoulder and arm and gracefully folded hands form a visual barrier. This is appropriate, however, since a good Renaissance wife would not have been forward, but modest and demur. However, even as we are kept at a distance we are offered an invitation through her expression. Mona Lisa gently turns her head and, looking just beyond us, smiles. We sense a calm peacefulness in her and we try to fathom what has caused her mysterious, quiet pleasure. Is she reacting to our presence, to something else in our space, or simply to a memory?

Vasari's wonderful story of musicians and jesters is testimony to the universality of this quest to find an explanation for what is ultimately impossible to know, another person's state of mind. He felt compelled to explain how it was that Leonardo was able to surpass what had come before, not only in the realm of representation, but in expression as well. And since he considered Leonardo to be recording what was before his eyes, the cause of Mona Lisa's smile had to be, not in the artist's imagination, but in the actual performance of the painting. Whatever explanation we may propose for her smile, there is no question that Leonardo has extended the boundaries of the genre of female portraiture by representing not only the outer appearance of his sitter, an idealized exemplar of beauty and virtue, but also the motions of her mind.

How did Leonardo come to this new mode of portraiture? How did he come to accept the challenge offered by the epigram of Martial that Domenico Ghirlandaio coyly painted on a scrap of paper in the background of his posthumous portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni (``Art, would that you could represent character and

mind!")?[11] The explanation lies in Leonardo's general philosophy of art. In his unfinished treatise on painting, Leonardo asserted that the artist was obligated not only to paint all aspects of the visual world — to be a universalist, rather than a specialist — but particularly when painting a narrative, to depict figures who reveal their motives and emotions through their actions.

``That figure is most admirable," he states, ``which by its actions best expresses the passion that animates it."[12] The promulgation of this principle was not unique with Leonardo. It was also the centerpiece of Leon Battista Alberti's pioneering treatise *On Painting*. Written in 1434 in Latin and then immediately translated into Italian by the author himself, this treatise represents the first surviving example of art theory. It lays out a program for the development of a new Renaissance style that finds its highest expression in what Alberti calls the *istoria* or narrative painting. For an artist to create a successful *istoria* he must engage both the eye and mind of the viewer. One way in which this is realized is through empathy, which, in turn, can only be aroused through the creation of figures who project convincing emotions. Since words are absent, these must be conveyed through the figures' actions. As Alberti points out:

> The *istoria* will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul. . . . We weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing, and grieve with the grieving. These movements of the soul are made known by movements of the body.[13]

Leonardo's own musings on the art of painting, which he began recording during his tenure at the court of the Duke of Milan, reflect a familiarity with Alberti's thought. Leonardo's program of proceeding from first principles, for example, his insistence that skill must always be informed by theory, clearly owes a debt to Alberti. Leonardo's assertion,

> Those who are in love with practice without knowledge are like the sailor who gets into a ship without rudder or compass and who never can be certain where he is going. Practice must always be founded on sound theory . . . [14]

could almost be an echo of Alberti's proposition,

> Let no one doubt that the man who does not perfectly understand what he is attempting to do when painting, will never be a good painter.[15]

Alberti's advice concerning decorum and proper proportion in the representation of figures sounds as though it could have been written by Leonardo as a justification for his extraordinary anatomical investigations. According to Alberti, the successful artist had to understand the underlying structure of the human form if he wished to create believable narratives enacted by believable actors. In rendering a figure, one

> must observe a certain conformity in regard to the size of members, and in this it will help, when painting living creatures, first to sketch in the bones, . . . [t]hen add the sinews and muscles, and finally clothe the bones and muscles with flesh and skin. . . . [For] just as for a clothed figure we first have to draw the naked body beneath and then cover it with clothes, so in painting a nude the bones and muscles must be arranged first, and then covered with appropriate flesh and skin.[16]

But, even if he began with Alberti's ideas, Leonardo typically went well beyond them, driven by an internal, omnivorous curiosity and ambition to know and understand everything. As a result, Leonardo consistently created something new, something unique. His anatomical investigations, for example, clearly go beyond anything that Alberti had envisioned, and Leonardo's proposed treatise on the nature of light and shadow contrasts starkly in scale and analytical power with the Florentine humanist's few pragmatic suggestions concerning their function in creating a convincing sense of relief.

In the case of the *Mona Lisa*, it was Leonardo's brilliant decision to extend Alberti's charge to reveal the motives and emotions of actors in *istoria* and apply it to the genre of female portraiture that led him to create a new paradigm. According to Renaissance physiognomic

theory, the character of an individual was visible in his features. Thus, if a man were crafty, he would typically display vulpine features; and, if he were majestic, his features would appear leonine. This principle allowed for the creation of greater variety in the representation of men, a variety that reflected the broad spectrum of socially acceptable male character traits. In the case of women, since it was generally believed that an unblemished soul manifests itself through external beauty, artists tended to suppress the representation of individuality and character in their virtuous female sitters in favor of a uniform, expressionless ideal beauty meant to reflect their inner purity. Leonardo did not reject the fundamental premise that female virtue manifests itself in external appearance.

Mona Lisa is represented as a dark, classic beauty, with features similar to those which the artist applied to his mature Madonnas.[17] But Leonardo has also engaged us through our natural tendency to try to identify and participate in the emotional state of another. We are moved to try to empathize with Mona Lisa, to understand her divine, enigmatic smile, an expression that reflects the motions of her mind. The end result of Leonardo's experiment was the creation of what is quite possibly the first psychological, as well as emblematic, female portrait.

In 1482 Leonardo left Florence, where he had been working on an Adoration of the Magi for the monastery of San Donato a Scopeto, and traveled north to Milan, a city three times the size of Florence. According to an anonymous sixteenth-century source, Leonardo undertook the journey on behalf of Lorenzo de' Medici. Leonardo and a young musician named Atalante Migliorotti, were sent to deliver a lyre to Lodovico il Moro, Duke of Milan, on Lorenzo's behalf. Vasari concurs that it was Leonardo's abilities as a musician that first drew him to the Milanese ruler's attention. Whatever the reason for his trip, however, once he arrived in Milan, the young artist quickly distinguished himself as a painter and decided to remain, undoubtedly in hopes of attaining a position at court.

Leonardo's first documented Milanese commission was not actually associated directly with the Sforza court, however. In April, 1483, Leonardo, together with two Milanese artists, Ambrogio and Evangelista de Predis, contracted to complete an altarpiece for the recently constructed oratory of the Confraternity of the Immaculate

Conception. The company had already obtained an ornately carved frame, and Leonardo and the de Predis brothers were engaged to paint and gild this frame and then paint a central panel with flanking angels. Leonardo was to be responsible for the main image and the de Predis were to execute the accompanying angels. The subsequent history of this altarpiece, the so-called *Madonna of the Rocks*, is very complicated. A dispute involving payment for the work led first to it probably being reclaimed by Leonardo, and eventually to its replacement in the early sixteenth century by a second version, probably also by Leonardo. As a result, there are actually two renditions of the subject, an earlier one now in Paris, and a later one in London.[18] Although the two works are similar, the Louvre painting is more spacious, more illusive in terms of its iconography, more delicate in its figural types, and more subtle in its modeling. In both compositions, four figures are gathered in front of a strange, watery cave whose exact spatial relationship to the foreground group is uncertain at best. The effects of light on the figures and even more impressively on the mist-shrouded stream and rocks in the distant background are further evidence of Leonardo's interest in the effects of atmospheric or aerial perspective. These two works, which unfortunately we will not have time to discuss, exemplify the combination of tradition and innovation, of observation and mystery which creates the special aura of Leonardo's mature images.

As an ambitious man, Leonardo certainly saw his future, however, not in the uncertain world of confraternal commissions or portraits, but in the unlimited potential for creative opportunities offered by the Milanese court. Leonardo's direct involvement with Lodovico il Moro, the Duke of Milan, can probably be dated to 1485, when the artist seems to have been referred to in a letter written by a ducal ambassador to the King of Hungary. The draft of a letter from Leonardo to Ludovico in the famous Codex Atlanticus in Milan probably dates from about this same time.[19] This remarkable document constitutes both an application and a résumé, detailing all of the artist's skills. It may seem puzzling to find military arts and engineering expertise taking precedence over the arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture in the artist's list of skills, but one has to remember the circumstances and the audience. Ludovico il Moro was a ruler who had usurped his position and who faced potential military

threats from France in the North, Venice in the East, and the papacy in the South. Furthermore, he came from a family of distinguished *condottieri* or mercenary generals, who rose to power through their military prowess in the middle of the fifteenth century, and who, though now titled, still maintained this as one of their most significant public identities. More important, however, there was an already defined position at court for someone with the kinds of practical expertise which Leonardo detailed in his letter, ducal engineer, and this is clearly what he was applying for.

In the letter, Leonardo makes specific reference to a bronze horse. This is a shorthand way of referring to a colossal equestrian monument dedicated to Lodovico's father, Francesco, the founder of the Sforza dynasty, which the duke was having created. This project was actually begun in the 1470s, but had lain dormant for reasons of economics and expertise until Leonardo was engaged to carry it out. In anticipation of creating the monument, the artist did a number of studies of horses, attending particularly to their proportions. He eventually fashioned a huge clay model of the animal (24 feet high), and worked out the logistics for casting this enormous object. Unfortunately the project and the model did not survive the French invasion of 1499. The clay horse was apparently used for target practice by the occupying archers. Lodovico's interest in this equestrian project was undoubtedly motivated by his status as a usurper of the duchy. The erection of so prominent a monument to his father on the ravelins of the Castello Sforzesco — an imposing monument to Sforza power in its own right — would have served as a public reminder to his subjects and to court visitors of the duke's ancestry.

Lodovico's concern with his genealogy also inspired another important architectural monument. The Duke underwrote a plan to transform the medieval Milanese Dominican monastic church of Sta. Maria delle Grazie into a mausoleum for the Sforza clan, a Milanese equivalent to St. Denis, the royal mausoleum for the kings of France. In 1492, he employed the Urbinate architect Donato Bramante to convert the eastern end of this monastic church into an enormous domed, centralized space with large wall niches where the Sforza tombs might eventually be placed. Unfortunately, although the choir was rebuilt, the Sforza tombs were never installed here. Lodovico's patronage of the church, however, extended beyond simply rebuilding

its eastern end. He presented the friars with other lavish gifts, including church furnishings, and in late 1494 or early 1495, he financed the enlargement and redecoration of the monastery's refectory. It was here that Leonardo was commissioned to paint an image of the Last Supper (fig. 2) on the wall facing a huge fresco of the Crucifixion by a local Lombard artist, Donato da Montorfano.[20]

There was a long tradition of representing the Last Supper in monastic dining halls.[21] The subject was considered particularly appropriate because it offered a biblical context for the mundane, daily meals that took place before it. We can refer to one mid-fifteenth-century example of this theme to see how it was usually represented. In 1447, Andrea del Castagno painted a Last Supper, Crucifixion, Entombment, and Resurrection on a wall in the refectory of the former convent of San Appollonia in Florence.[22] Castagno portrays the Last Supper as taking place in a chamber which seems to actually continue the space of the refectory itself. Here we see the apostles, seated behind a long table, engaged in the contemplation or discussion of Jesus' announcement of his impending betrayal. Judas is isolated on the viewer's side of the table, his Semitic features so overtly demonic that some historians have interpreted this as representing his possession by Satan. The sop in Judas's right hand also identifies him as Jesus' betrayer. Castagno's apostles are identified by labels inscribed on the platform beneath their feet and are given different rhetorical gestures, presumably suggesting different mental states.[23] In spite of this, however, the actors' gestures are very contained and manifestly artificial, so the painting seems devoid of any real emotional content.

Castagno's version represents the dominant tradition of depicting the Last Supper that Leonardo inherited. In general, artists tended to focus on the theme of betrayal, to differentiate the actors through their gestures, and to separate Judas from the other apostles through the simple devices of haloes, physiognomy, and physical isolation.

A fair number of drawings by Leonardo associated with the Last Supper survive, from rather quick compositional sketches to finished studies of the heads and gestures of individual apostles. Interestingly enough, the very earliest of these drawings indicate that Leonardo's initial plan was to follow the refectory tradition, that is, to show Jesus and the apostles ranged on one side of a long table and Judas isolated on the other.[24] St. John is shown asleep, resting on Christ's breast. At

some point, however, the artist changed his mind and decided to renounce the motif of the sleeping St. John and, more significantly, to integrate the traitor in among the other figures. This second decision meant that he had to devise new means for differentiating Judas from the others.

The work took over two years to complete. Normally, one would have expected Leonardo to paint the image in true fresco, a technique in which the artist paints directly onto a layer of smooth damp plaster, called the intonaco. As the intonaco dries, the pigment actually weds with the plaster through a chemical reaction, creating an incredibly durable image. This durability was one of the main attractions of the medium, but it also had its limitations. Because the pigment had to be applied to the plaster while it was still wet, the artist had to make quick decisions regarding the composition and its individual elements. He had to work relatively fast, before the surface could dry. These limitations were clearly not acceptable to Leonardo who, as we shall see, preferred to work in a more circumspect manner. Consequently, he decided to apply a ground of white lead to the dry plaster wall and paint in superimposed layers of tempera shaded with oil pigment. This unusual hybrid technique allowed him a greater subtlety of modeling than what was possible in fresco, and also to proceed at a more deliberate pace. Unfortunately, this experimental technique did not hold up well, because the paint did not adhere to the ground as it should have. As a result, the image began to deteriorate, so that by Vasari's time the work was ``so badly affected that nothing is visible but a mass of blots."

In addition to the painting's gradual natural deterioration, it also suffered greatly at the hands of man. In 1632, a doorway was cut through the bottom part of composition. During the Napoleonic occupation of Milan from 1796 to 1806, despite the general's orders to the contrary, the refectory was used as a magazine, hay-store, and stable. In addition to the damage from natural forces, neglect, and abuse, clumsy attempts at restoration, beginning as early the seventeenth century, have also taken their toll. Finally, in 1943, during an Allied raid, an errant bomb fell on the refectory, reducing it to rubble. By some miracle, the two frescoes, which had been braced with iron scaffolding and sandbagged, managed to survive. The refectory was rebuilt and the frescoes restored. Then, in 1979, the long

process of meticulous cleaning and stabilization based on rigorous scientific analysis was begun. This latest conservation project was finally completed in 1999, and now, the ghost of the *Last Supper* is once again on limited display.

Because the painting was almost immediately recognized as a masterpiece, it was very frequently copied. These copies, along with Leonardo's drawings and what remains today of the original paint, give us a very good idea of how the work looked when it was finished. The apostles are arranged behind a long refectory table. The scene, which is lit from the left in accordance with the actual light in the refectory, is set into a deep room whose back wall is pierced by a doorway and flanking windows that reveal a distant landscape. The side walls of this room are hung with tapestries. At first glance, the space of the apostles' dining room appears to be a continuation of that of the refectory. Closer examination, however, reveals that this is only an illusion. In reality, Leonardo has rendered his chamber from a point directly in front of the figure of Christ, a position which obviously no earthly viewer could occupy, since the base of the painting is about seven feet above eye level. Thus, the artist has created a space which appears natural, but in reality is not. This room is subtly unsettling in another way, for if you were to project the lines of the tapestries on the side walls and the ceiling forward, they expand at different rates.

The apostles are arranged symbolically in four groups of three around the central figure of Christ. Leonardo uses the openings in the background to help to focus his composition, placing the central doorway directly behind Christ. This isolates him and creates a sort of natural halo. Jesus is also singled out through his scale and pose. He is slightly larger than the other figures, and, in contrast to the animated movements and reactions of the apostles, Jesus seems inordinately calm, stretching out his hands over the table to create a central, triangular pool of serenity in the midst of the chaos about him.

As in earlier paintings of the Last Supper, each of the apostles exhibits an individual reaction. But in Leonardo's work, their emotions seems to come from within. Their reactions do not seem to reflect so much a repertoire of stock gestures as ``revelations of the motions of their minds." Vasari clearly recognized and appreciated this virtuosity of expression:

> Leonardo also executed in Milan, for the Dominicans of Santa Maria delle Grazie, a marvellous and beautiful painting of the Last Supper. Having depicted the heads of the apostles full of splendor and majesty, he deliberately left the head of Christ unfinished, convinced he would fail to give it the divine spirituality it demands. This all but finished work has ever since been held in the greatest veneration by the Milanese and others. In it Leonardo brilliantly succeeded in envisaging and reproducing the tormented anxiety of the apostles to know who had betrayed their master; so in their faces one can read the emotions of love, dismay, and anger, or rather sorrow, at their failure to grasp the meaning of Christ. And this excites no less admiration than the contrasted spectacle of the obstinacy, hatred, and treachery in the face of Judas or, indeed, than the incredible diligence with which every detail of the work was executed.[25]

Judas has been singled out among the apostles, but not through the traditional device of isolation. Instead, Leonardo relies exclusively on posture, gesture, and light to differentiate the traitor from the faithful. Judas pulls back from Jesus, even as he reaches for the sop and dish; and his Semitic features, rendered in lost profile, are cast into shadow, symbolically expressing the darkness of his soul.

Vasari's description of the painting was quite laudatory, but it is not completely accurate, for the work does not only allude to the announcement of Jesus' betrayal. As Leo Steinberg has brilliantly demonstrated most recently in *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, it actually represents a complex interweaving of both of the principal threads of the story: the narrative moment that begins the passion (the left side of the painting) and the mystical moment of the institution of the Eucharist (the right side of the painting).[26] The gestures and reactions of the apostles reflect this division. Since our time is limited, we will examine only the two inner triads.

The left-hand group consists of the beautiful St. John, who will stand in mourning with the Holy Family at the Crucifixion itself; St. Peter, the most violent of the apostles, who starts forward in aggressive disbelief, and who holds in his right hand a knife, the implement he will use to cut off the ear of the high priest's servant at the moment of

Christ's capture; and Judas, the antagonist of this drama. This triad focuses on the betrayal and Passion and the two essential reactions to these events, anger (St. Peter) and sorrowful contemplation (St. John). On the other side we find three apostles who react to the mystery of the institution of the Eucharist. The most skeptical figure is St. Thomas, who gestures upward as though to indicate the source of the miracle that they are witnessing. St. James the Lesser throws his arms outward in a gesture emblematic of wonder. Finally, St. Philip clasps his hands to breast, taking the promise of salvation offered by Christ's sacrifice into his own heart. These two themes, betrayal and ritual, are united in the central figure of Jesus. His triangular pose reflects the mystery of the trinity. His outstretched arms recall the pitiful image of Christ as the Man of Sorrows in the tomb, the sufferer for the salvation of mankind, an anticipatory echo of the Crucifixion on the opposite wall.[27] His right hand points both to the traitorous gesture of Judas and to the simple glass of wine upon the table, while his left, palm upward, indicates a round loaf, the Eucharistic wafer.

It is perhaps because the Last Supper weaves these themes together so seamlessly, appealing both to the viewer's mind and emotions through the narrative of the Passion and the mystery of the Eucharist, that Leonardo's work, even as it has survived — a shadow of a shadow — has been considered one of the central images of Western art and Christianity. It is an image that rewards prolonged viewing and active contemplation, conditions which would have been encouraged in a monastic environment.

What is, of course, not overtly visible in the final image is the process by which Leonardo created this masterpiece. I've already mentioned the handful of preparatory drawings that survive. In addition, two important sixteenth-century texts offer anecdotal accounts of the artist at work. The first of these is by Matteo Bandello, a writer of *novelle*. As a youth, Bandello stayed with his uncle at Santa Maria delle Grazie and had seen Leonardo at work there in 1497. Later, he incorporated his memories into one of his stories:

> Many a time I have seen Leonardo go early in the morning to work on the platform before The Last Supper; and there he would stay from sunrise till darkness, never laying down the brush, but continuing to paint without eating or drinking.

> Then, three or four days would pass without his touching the work, yet each day he would spend several hours examining it and criticizing the figures to himself. I have also seen him, when the fancy took him, leave the Corte Vecchia when he was at work on the stupendous horse of clay, and go straight to the Grazie. There, climbing on the platform, he would take a brush and give a few touches to one of the figures; and then suddenly he would leave and go elsewhere.[28]

The second account of Leonardo at work appeared in a book published in 1535. It is more anecdotal and amusing, and evidently appealed to Vasari, who incorporated it into his biography of Leonardo. In Vasari's words:

> It is said that the prior [of Santa Maria delle Grazie] used to keep pressing Leonardo, in the most importunate way, to hurry up and finish the work, because he was puzzled by Leonardo's habit of sometimes spending half a day at a time contemplating what he had done so far; if the prior had had his way, Leonardo would have toiled like one of the labourers hoeing in the garden and never put his brush down for a moment. Not satisfied with this, the prior then complained to the duke, making such a fuss that the duke was constrained to send for Leonardo and, very tactfully, question him about the painting, although he showed perfectly well that he was only doing so because of the prior's insistence. Leonardo, knowing he was dealing with a prince of acute and discerning intelligence, was willing (as he never had been with the prior) to explain his mind at length; and so he talked to the duke for a long time about the art of painting.
>
> He explained that men of genius sometimes accomplished most when they work the least; for, he added, they are thinking out inventions and forming in their minds the perfect ideas which they subsequently express and reproduce with their hands. Leonardo then said that he still had two heads to paint; the head of Christ was one, and for this he was unwilling to look for any human model, nor did he dare suppose that his imagination could conceive the beauty and

> divine grace that properly belonged to the incarnate Deity. Then, he said, he had yet to do the head of Judas, and this troubled him since he did not think he could imagine the features that would form the countenance of a man who, despite all the blessings he had been given, could so cruelly steel his will to betray his own master and the creator of the world. However, added Leonardo, he would try to find a model for Judas, and if he did not succeed in doing so, why then he was not without the head of that tactless and importunate prior. The duke roared with laughter at this and said that Leonardo had every reason in the world for saying so. The unfortunate prior retired in confusion to worry the laborers working in his garden, and he left off worrying Leonardo.[29]

These two tales offer much food for thought regarding the artist's relationship to his patrons, the quality of Leonardo's wit, and, most significantly for us, the nature of his working method. Leonardo's creative approach, which struck the prior as infuriatingly fitful, can be described as a combination of planning and discovery. What seems apparent is that Leonardo really did not know precisely what he was going to create when he began to paint the Last Supper. At the outset, the image in his mind was not complete to the last detail, nor had he worked it out completely on paper beforehand, creating *modelli* or cartoons which he then transferred to the wall, as he might have been constrained to do had he worked in true fresco. He even criticized artists who tried to work in such a predictable fashion:

> You who compose narratives, do not articulate the individual parts of those pictures with determinate outlines, or else there will happen to you what usually happens to many and different painters who want every, even the slightest trace of charcoal to remain valid; this sort of person may well earn a fortune but no praise with his art.[30]

The method he recommended was substantially different:

> . . . first strive in drawing to represent your intention to the eye by expressive forms, and the idea originally formed in your

> imagination; then go on taking out or putting in, until you have satisfied yourself.[31]

Leonardo's work was the result of an initial plan, defined by the program — ``paint a Last Supper'' — that was then constantly modified by a series of decisions — some large, some small, some carefully considered, some almost instinctual — each of which in turn influenced the next, helping to shape the gradually emerging whole. In the *Last Supper*, the most obvious of these was the artist's decision to place Judas among the apostles. But even more telling and profound was Leonardo's decision to recount both the dramatic effects of the story and its mysterious, spiritual implications. This was combined with a simultaneous commitment to the principle of variety, but a variety that encouraged contemplation and empathy.

Once these decisions were made, Leonardo was compelled to find expressive solutions that went beyond the traditional modes of representation. The emotional states of his actors had to be expressed through gestures that derived not simply from rhetorical tradition but from real observation as well. What also seems apparent from Bandello's and Vasari's accounts is that each time Leonardo laid down a stroke of paint and the image on the wall changed, he was obliged to confront a new range of visual possibilities, to see the whole work in a new light. This open, evolving, dialogue between the artist and the image was at the center of his innovative genius and creative process.

Observations found in Leonardo's notebooks on painting suggest how this dialogue worked. Random patterns in nature could serve as an inspiration:

> I cannot forebear to mention . . . a new device for study which, although it may seem trivial and almost ludicrous, is nevertheless, extremely useful in arousing the mind to various inventions. . . . [W]hen you look at a wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture stones, if you have to devise some scene, you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes, beautiful with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills in varied arrangement; or again you may see battles and figures in action; or strange faces and costumes, and an endless variety of objects, which you could reduce to

> complete and well drawn forms.[32]

What Leonardo is describing is one of the principal characteristics of the imaginative process, that is, the ability to find inspiration in the accidental and unformed. He applied this method in his drawings as well. Although he was certainly capable of producing highly finished model book drawings, Leonardo often worked and reworked the same image, sometimes transforming a compositional idea into a virtual equivalent of the unformed stain upon the wall. From this ink or chalk mass he would then pluck a contour with his stylus and begin anew. Leonardo was engaging in what Ernst H. Gombrich has called a process of continuous creation.[33] The artist's working method allowed him to retain many options simultaneously, to postpone a final commitment until the last possible moment. His constant reengagement with the gestating image of the *Last Supper* represented a variation of this process. In this case, he kept coming back not to a stain upon the wall or an incessantly reworked drawing, but to his own creation, the image taking shape before him. Gazing upon it directly or mulling it over in his mind, consciously or unconsciously, he discovered an array of solutions to the problems of dramatic narrative that he had posed. These he subjected to a critical judgment formed by knowledge and experience, judgment applied both before the image and away from it:

> We know very well that errors are better recognized in the works of others than in our own; and that often, while reproving little faults in others, you may ignore great ones in yourself. To avoid such ignorance . . . it is well that you should often leave off work and take a little relaxation, because, when you come back to it you are a better judge; for sitting too close at work may greatly deceive you.[34]

Undoubtedly, his decision to work in the more incremental technique of tempera afforded him the time for reflection and distance that he required.

Painting for Leonardo, then, was not so much a unique act as a gradual realization, an unfolding of possibilities, which may help to explain his notoriously slow method of working. Creation was a

conversation between the known and the unknown, a vision that was, on the one hand, structured and logical, and on the other, fresh and unpredictable. His works are crystallizations of this creative process, continuous dialogues of discovery that invite reflection. Leonardo's paintings strike a provocative balance between the mysterious and the commonplace. They touch chords that reverberate with the universals of human experience, the desire to know another human being or to understand our relationship with a higher power, and the mesmerizing harmony that they create seems truly to define what makes a painting a masterpiece.

Notes

[1]Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, (Florence, 1550; revised and expanded, 1568).

[2]Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, vol. 1, trans. George Bull (New York: Peter Smith Publishing, 1965), pp. 151-52.

[3]Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, p. 255.

[4]Two of the best discussions of Leonardo's life and art remain Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci* (1967; rpt. London: Viking, 1989), and Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci, the Marvellous Works of Nature and Man* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press 1981). A concise chronology of his career can be found in Carmen C. Bambach, ed., *Leonardo da Vinci, Master Draftsman* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), pp. 227-41.

[5]Frank Zöllner, ``Leonardo's Portrait of Mona Lisa del Giocondo," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts,* 121 (1993): 115-38.

[6]Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, pp. 266-67.

[7]See, for example, Hans Memling's *Portrait of an Old Woman* in the Louvre, reproduced in Dirk de Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works* (Ghent: Ludion Press, 1994), cat. 14.

[8]For a discussion of early fifteenth-century female portrait in its social context, see Patricia Simons ``Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, ed., *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), pp. 38-57.

[9]For a discussion of Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci*, see David Alan Brown, *et al., Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2001), pp. 142-46.

[10]My reading of Ginevra's expression as ``wooden" and unengaged is by no means universal. In the National Gallery of Art video *Ginevra's Story*

(1999), the sitter's expression is interpreted as ``melancholy," and consequently the *Ginevra* is called Leonardo's first ``psychological portrait." Although this is certainly a legitimate reading of the painting, such a projection of a particular state of mind onto Ginevra's blank features can also be credited to a natural desire to try to enter into the experience of another human being through an interpretation of their facial expression.

It is also worth noting that Vasari asserted that an appearance of melancholy in portraiture was a natural tendency which Leonardo overcame in the *Mona Lisa*. This would support an interpretation of the ``melancholy" character of Ginevra's expression as simply the result of fifteenth-century conventions of representation, rather than a psychological projection of the character of the sitter.

[11]For an illustration and recent discussion of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni* (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid), see Brown, *et al.*, *Virtue and Beauty*, pp. 190-93.

[12]Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci,* trans. and ed. Jean Paul Richter (London, 1883; rpt. New York: Dover Books, 1970), vol. 1, p. 292.

[13] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 76.

[14]Leonardo, *Notebooks*, vol. 1, p. 18.

[15]Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 59.

[16]Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 72.

[17]Vasari may well have sensed the affinity between Leonardo's rendering of Mona Lisa and his sacred images when the biographer referred to her smile as ``more divine than human." As several authors have observed, the angel in the Louvre version of the *Madonna of the Rocks*, St. Anne in the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and the Lamb*, also in the Louvre, and the Madonna in the *Virgin and Child with SS. Anne and John the Baptist* in the National Gallery, London, all have expressions which are similar, though not identical, to that of Mona Lisa.

[18]In general, good color illustrations of Leonardo's paintings can be found in Pietro C. Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci, the Complete Paintings,* trans. A. Lawrence Jenkens (New York: Abrams, 2000).

[19]For the text of the letter, see Leonardo, *Notebooks,* vol. 2, pp. 395-98.

[20]The Donato da Montorfano *Crucifixion* is illustrated in Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci*, p. 229.

[21]For a discussion of the Florentine tradition of images of the Last Supper in refectories, see R. Scott Walker, ``Florentine Painted Refectories,

1350-1500" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1979); Cristina Acidini Luchinat and Rosanna Caterina Proto Pisani, *La tradizione fiorentina dei cenacoli* (Firenze: Cassa di risparmio di Firenze, 1997); and Stefanie Felicitas Ohlig, *Florentiner Refektorien: Form, Funktion und die Programme ihrer Fresken* (New York: Hansel-Hohenhausen, 2000).

[22]For a color illustration of the Castagno frescoes in San Apollonia, see Laurie Schneider Adams, *Italian Renaissance Art* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), pl. 6.16.

[23]As has been generally noted, the stormy pattern of veining in the panel behind and above the figures of Christ, John, Peter, and Judas, was another device used by Castagno to invest his painting with visual drama.

[24]See the illustrations in Marani, *Leonardo*, pp. 226-27, 230-33, and 242, and in Bambach, ed., *Leonardo da Vinci, Master Draftsman*, fig. 26.

[25]Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, p. 262.

[26]Leo Steinberg, *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper* (New York: Zone Books, 2001). This is an expanded and revised version of an article on the *Last Supper* which Steinberg first published in *Art Quarterly* in 1973.

[27]See Fra Angelico's fresco of the *Man of Sorrows* in the cloister of San Marco, Florence, reproduced in William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New York: BCA, 1993), pl. 151.

[28]Quoted in Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, p. 146.

[29]Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, pp. 262-63.

[30]Quoted in E.H. Gombrich, ``Leonardo's Method for Working out Compositions," in *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 58.

[31]Leonardo, *Notebooks*, vol. 1, p. 252.

[32]Leonardo, *Notebooks*, vol. 1, p. 254.

[33]E.H. Gombrich, ``Leonardo's Method," pp. 58-63, and *idem,* ``Watching Artists at Work: Commitment and Improvisation in the History of Drawing," in *Topics of Our Time: Twentieth-Century Issues in Learning and in Art* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991), esp. pp. 102-08. For other very provocative discussions of Leonardo's drawings and their function in the creative process, see David Rosand, ``The Handwriting of the Self, Leonardo da Vinci," in *Drawing Acts: Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 61-111, and the various essays in the catalogue for 2003 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition ``Leonardo da Vinci, Master Draftsman" (see n. 4 above).

[34]Leonardo, *Notebooks*, vol. 1, p. 265.